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AUTHOR Juul, Kristen D.
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ABSTRACT

A workshop for 15 special education teachers was designed to provide basic skills in the arts, develop an appreciation of the four major art forms, and help incorporate arts into the classroom. Participants met for five sessions during which they were exposed to lectures on the history of the arts and the handicapped and a review of theories, literature, and research regarding the educational and therapeutic value of the arts; introductions to the major art forms; and practicum experiences in a camp for 40 severely/multiply disabled children. On pre-post questionnaires, participants showed substantial positive changes in their understanding of the creative process, belief in the benefits of arts activites, and confidence in presenting arts activities. Outgrowths of the workshop have included a college course on integrated arts for the handicapped and a national survey on the role of the arts in special education teacher training. (CL)

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Integrated Arts for the Handicapped: A Workshop for Teachers

Kristen D. Juul
Department of Special Education
Southern Illinois University
at Carbondale

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Integrated Arts for the Handicapped: A Workshop for Teachers

Kristen D. Juul

Artistic creativity is a fundamental human need. It has been found in all cultures, primitive and advanced, throughout history. It is, perhaps, the one noble manifestation of the human spirit that more than anything else draws mankind together.

For children, the arts are also a powerful medium in their education and growth. Through the visual arts, music, drama, and movement, they involve themselves and are challenged physically, intellectually, emotionally, and socially. Experience has shown that for handicapped children, art in some form can be an especially effective way of compensating for physical, intellectual, or other limitations. Still, it is estimated that only 12 percent of the 8 million handicapped school children in the United States receive any arts education. This is presumably much less than is the case with non-handicapped students. One reason for this discrepancy is the fact that most teachers in special education receive little or no training in the arts, nor are they encouraged to include these subjects in the curriculum. Moreover, the art, music, and physical education teachers in the ordinary schools often do not serve the exceptional children.

The purpose of this paper is to describe a workshop for teachers in special education at Southern Illinois University. It was designed to give present and future teachers some basic skills in the arts, to develop in them an appreciation of four major art forms, and to help them incorporate the arts into their own classrooms.

The project was planned by a team of professors in the visual arts, music, creative drama, creative movement, and special education. Financial support came from the National Committee Arts for The Handicapped. This

committee is a coordinating agency for creating and promoting art programs for handicapped individuals, and it receives funding both from the federal government and from the private sector.

Fifteen trainees participated in the program. The group met five Saturdays during the spring of 1981. The first day was devoted to lectures on the history of the arts and the handicapped and a review of theories, literature, and research regarding the educational and therapeutic value of the arts. There were also slide presentations from different countries of schools and therapeutic communities in which the arts serve an important function.

In the subsequent four sessions the students received an introduction to the four major art forms and learned some elementary skills in each medium. During the summer, a week of practicum experiences was conducted in a camp for handicapped children. Plans had been made for children with relatively mild disabilities, but when students and staff arrived in the camp it turned out that most of the campers were quite severely mentally retarded and sometimes multiply handicapped. Some quick changes in the plans had to be made since some of the activities assumed a higher conceptual and verbal ability than what the campers possessed. Some emotional first aid also had to be given to some of the students who had never before been exposed to severely handicapped children and were bothered by feelings of revulsion and other negative emotional reactions.

About 40 children participated in the workshop. They were divided into four groups which rotated so that all of them had a period with each of the four arts modalities every day. The trainees selected the group they wanted to work with and stayed with that group throughout the week.

The culminating activity on Friday afternoon was a variety show which attracted a sizable audience. The performance was recorded by a television crew and included in the evening news on a station covering a four-state area.

During the week the trainees made great progress in their confidence and sensitivity in working with handicapped children. They also made rapid improvements in their ability to engage the children in arts activities.

As part of the evaluation procedure a questionnaire was adapted from an NCAH publication. It was given to the participants during the first day of the workshop and four months after its completion. The trainees showed substantial changes in a positive direction in their understanding of the creative process, in their beliefs that involvement in arts activities was beneficial both in academic learning and general adjustment, and in their confidence in presenting arts experiences in their classes.

Among the participants who were already classroom teachers the typical response before the workshop was to involve their pupils in arts activities either never or less than once a week. After the workshop the majority would have arts experiences one or more times a day. Similarly the reactions of the pupils to arts experiences moved from resistance to enthusiasm and a wish for more.

The workshop staff were encouraged by the results and decided to put together a regular college course based on the workshop format. It was called "Integrated Arts for the Handicapped". A syllabus was jointly written up and printed under the auspices of the NCAH. The book has been nationally promoted by the Committee and is for sale at the university bookstore.

The course has so far been offered twice, and the plans are to continue to give it once a year. The children participating in the practicum come from a resource room in the city schools. They are moderately disabled and their problems are in learning and social adjustment. Most of them are black and come from poor and culturally disadvantaged families. The resource teacher is black, enormously talented, and physically disabled. Since an accident in her childhood she has been confined to a wheelchair. She has worked closely with the college staff, and has shown great skill in using the arts involvement for the benefit of her pupils.

The first year the general theme of the practicum was a circus with dancers, acrobats, and musical performances. The second year the student teacher in the resource room was a girl from China. She wrote down a Chinese folk tale which was used as a plot. The story was about a lion which each New Year's Eve comes to a village and takes away a child. A stranger finally comes to the rescue together with a dragon, and the lion is scared away forever.

In preparing the show, everybody worked together. Several children made pencil sketches for the stage setting, of which one was selected. The group had also learned from the student teacher some Chinese symbols which were used in the stage decorations.

On the final day of the course the play was performed. The children were so pleased with it that they wanted to show it to their whole school. This was arranged, the show was presented before an audience of all the pupils and teachers, the principal, and the superintendent.

In line with the Oriental theme the participating children also did some work in Haiku, a Japanese art form, which integrates different art

modalities. First each child wrote a short poem, which then was acted out in creative movement. The poem was finally depicted in a painting which was turned into a fan.

There has been no formal evaluation of the effect their brief involvement in the arts course has had on the children. However, their resource teacher has provided many illustrations of improvements in their self-confidence and self-esteem. It was also easy to observe how some children who were inhibited opened up and became more free and expressive in the permissive and encouraging atmosphere. In contrast, aaggressive boy with a compulsion to test limits found a constructive outlet for his anger in playing the lion. It was no doubt a highlight in his life to be applauded by the whole school for the mighty way he roared.

As additional spinoff from the workshop, the staff members have contributed several publications on the arts and have conducted a national survey on the place of the arts in teacher training in special education. On the drawing board there are now plans to expand the integrated arts course into a minor for teachers, rehabilitation workers and other professions serving the handicapped.